

Research Brief

Improving test scores

Question: What strategies can improve test scores?

Summary of Findings: According to research done by Amrein and Berliner, who studied 18 states with high stakes testing, their conclusion was that students did not necessarily score higher and often remained at the same level prior to the introduction of the high stakes testing. In other research done by Carnoy and Loeb, their findings indicated that students did better on national tests when there was a high level of accountability from the districts to the adults who were working with the students. Based on the results from states that have had high stakes testing, there are some issues and items of concern that will most likely arise when they are initiated.

- Scores will most likely rise the first 3-4 years because of the added attention on spending a great deal of time on test preparation. These scores do not necessarily indicate that students have learned more and/or are smarter than they were prior to the test.
- Where bonuses to teachers have been offered, that has not proven to be successful due to issues such as varying groups of students each year and high student mobility rates.
- For those schools that had been identified as being low performing, how successful have the sanctions been in terms of higher student achievement?

One recommendation made was that instead of schools being compared year-to-year, that students be compared to themselves to assess individual growth. There were several consistent points throughout the literature. The first was that if too much time is spent primarily teaching "to the test" that many other equally important content and skills may not be taught or will barely be touched upon. The second was that no matter what is done to help prepare students for high stakes testing, nothing takes the place of a good teacher who is well versed in the content and uses a variety of appropriate pedagogy. Last, regardless of the type of assessment that is in place, what was consistent throughout the literature was that its purpose should be to improve and strengthen the instructional program.

Major Findings and Conclusions:

General Characteristics that should be in place:

1. Content, goals, and skills should be identified and aligned with the standards. All educators should participate, follow-through, and have buy-in into what will be taught.
2. Data should be used to inform decisions about what content and skills should be taught.

3. Teachers should have adequate opportunities to work together to discuss and determine priorities, curriculum alignment, methodologies, and data collection.
4. Teachers should be given ample, appropriate, and on-going staff development in how to align curricula to the standards and utilize different strategies to meet the needs of students.
5. Content should be challenging and relevant.

Specific Ideas for test preparation:

1. After school tutoring program-for remediation and/or enrichment.
2. Breakfast club-either for remediation and/or enrichment.
3. Support group-those who have passed the test tutor those who will be taking the test.
4. Separate program for those who are 2 or more years behind grade level. Daily intensive math, reading, and writing. One school had co-teachers, one academic and the other vocational, in a group of no more than 20 students.
5. Summer school- for remediation and/or enrichment.
6. Mentoring from teacher to student and/or student to student.
7. Double periods of reading and math with more hands-on approaches and real life applications.
8. Tutoring a young elementary student in reading, writing, and/or math, applying the skills the high school student is learning.
9. Reading classes with high interest materials. One example given was the teacher models a comprehension/reading strategy, students discuss it in guided groups, and then they do silent sustained reading.
10. Literacy and math specialists tutor students and train teachers.
11. Teachers model reading and problem solving within their own content area, then teach students the skill(s) used.
12. Building in specific test taking strategies and types of processing into regular assignments.

Online Resources:

(Please note that accessing Ed Week files does require a FREE registration on their website.)

- Accountability helps students at risk
Studies of students at risk were found to have higher test scores when there was higher accountability of the districts, schools, and adults who work with the students.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=33walberg.h22>
- Accountability Studies Find Mixed Impact on Achievement
This article presents results of several studies done on the effects of high stakes testing.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=41account.h21>

- A quiet crisis: Unprepared for high stakes
Numerous ideas for test preparation strategies that are being used in different high schools are provided here.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=31catchup.h20>
- Assessment
This article cites issues surrounding high stakes testing and areas of consideration for school districts in this environment.
<http://www.edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id=41>
- High-stakes research
Education next, Summer 2003. This can be accessed from the references
This article takes issue with the research done by Berliner and Amrein.
<http://www.edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id=41>
- Integrating assessment and instruction in ways that support learning
This article provides a list of ideas that can be utilized for assessment development practices.
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assment/as500.htm>
- Researchers debate impact of tests
The results of several research studies on high stakes testing are described in this article.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=21carnoy.h22>
- Rethinking assessment and its role in supporting educational reform
Instructional reform relates to the local assessment in the classroom, while measurement/technical quality refers to state, district, and national level assessments. This article explains the differences between the two and why both are important.
<http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/assment/as700.htm>
- Survey show state testing alters instructional practices
This reports the results of a survey done with teachers from different states involved in high, moderate, and low stakes testing.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=32boston.h21>
- Test-based accountability: Making it work better

A list of six issues that should be considered in light of high stakes testing and ways in which states can address those issues to help make the testing experience more valuable, are included in this article.

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/newstory.cfm?slug=23stecher.h21>

- Test prep-The junk food of education
This article uses a junk food analogy to describe most test preparation programs. A descriptive list of what can be done to help raise test scores is included.
<http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=05marshall.h23>

Journals

- Educational Leadership. (2003, February). Vol. 60, No. 5. Whole issue: Using data to improve student achievement.
- Educational Leadership. (2003, November). Vo. 61, No. 3. Whole issue: The challenges of accountability.

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